

# Classical Traces of Metamorphosis in the Byzantine Hystera Formula

HETA BJÖRKLUND

In the Byzantine period, the rates of both maternal and infant mortality were high. Deaths of women during pregnancy and childbirth, and deaths of children were often attributed to child-killing or child-stealing demons, such as the Gello. Uterine amulets were designed to aid the wearer in pregnancy and childbirth, and to protect the women and their children. They were also intended to protect against the “wandering womb,” under which term several different ailments concerning women could be grouped.<sup>1</sup> This paper focuses on the “hystera formula,” a magical formula present in a group of Byzantine amulets that address the uterus (ὕστέρα in Greek). The formula compares the uterus to different animals, and asks it to calm down.<sup>2</sup> The formula is repeated with a range of variations, all meant to help the uterus in some manner.

1 See C. A. Faraone, “Magical and Medical Approaches to the Wandering Womb in the Ancient Greek World,” *Classical Antiquity* 30 (2011): 1–32 for the wandering womb as a useful concept for explaining female behavior.

2 Gary Vikan has suggested a similar function for Byzantine marriage rings and other jewelry, such as sixth- and seventh-century CE armbands. The material used in the jewelry, hematite, had a special function “as an antidote to the uterine bleeding symptomatic of miscarriage” (G. Vikan, “Art and Marriage in Early Byzantium,” *DOP* 44 [1990]: 145–63, 155–56, 160–61). Alicia Walker sees the Byzantine marriage rings as amulets designed to strengthen the love and marital concordance between husband and wife, not specifically to help the uterus or assist in pregnancy and childbirth (A. Walker, “A Reconsideration of Early Byzantine Marriage Rings,”

The amulets (known as hystera amulets after the magical formula inscribed on them) are metallic (lead, bronze, silver, gold) or gemstone (hematite, jasper) pendants, bezels, and rings that were used from the tenth through the twelfth centuries in the Byzantine Empire.<sup>3</sup> The amulets are inscribed with magical rhymes, religious texts, such as Psalm 90 (91), and numerous iconographical motifs. In addition to the images commonly found on all types of amulets, such as pentagrams, palm fronds, and crosses, the hystera amulets are notable because of the haunting, Medusa-like face surrounded by snakes,<sup>4</sup> also known

in *Between Magic and Religion*, ed. S. R. Asirvatham, C. O. Pache, and J. Watrous [Lanham, 2001], 149–64). Vikan sees the Byzantine marriage rings that depict a married couple as medical-magical amulets, whereas Walker classifies them under erotic magic.

3 J. Spier, “Medieval Byzantine Magical Amulets and Their Tradition,” *JWarb* 56 (1993): 25–62, 31–33, 61–62 for the dating of the amulets.

4 Most relevant in this context are deities who either have snakes emerging from their heads or have serpentine lower bodies. The most obvious examples are the Erinyes/Eumenides and the Gorgons. (Snakes growing from their heads: Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca* 2.4.2; Hesiod, *Shield of Heracles* 233–34; Euripides, *Hercules furens* 880–86. Snakes growing from the head are also a feature of Demeter Melaina [Aston, *Mixanthrôpoi*, 135].) It would be overly simplistic to suggest that all characters with snake hair were somehow connected with each other. As Emma Aston (*Mixanthrôpoi: Animal-Human Hybrid Deities in Greek Religion* [Liège, 2011], 257) repeatedly points out, a single animal feature

as the hystera motif. This motif is often accompanied by the hystera formula. The formula and the motif (terms I use in this article to refer exclusively to the text or the image, respectively) often appear together, but one is not necessary for the presence of the other. The occurrence of the hystera motif, along with the hystera formula, makes the amulets a recognizably coherent group.

As noted by Jeffrey Spier among others, the formula has a long history in literary and technical texts; a prototype of it must have existed already in the fifth century CE, if not earlier.<sup>5</sup> The formula was copied onto the amulets from magical handbooks, none of which survive except in post-Byzantine copies. But this direct relationship, which is well known, is only part of the story of the formula's sources. I propose that in addition to the existing literary and technical tradition, parts of the formula were borrowed from non-magical sources: from classical epics and plays, where

---

does not have one consistent meaning. However, I would suggest that even though the snake hair itself does not have one specific meaning, there is an underlying logic governing which characters are depicted with serpentine hair. Common features of these deities and figures are femaleness, motives of vengeance or retribution (justifiable and seeking to correct a transgression, as is the case with Demeter Melaina and the Erinyes), and existence outside the frames of normal, everyday life. Snake-haired deities seem to always mark some disturbance of the safe and ordinary. In addition to Demeter Melaina and the Erinyes, antiquity knew Echidna, whose lower body is that of a snake and upper body is that of a maiden; Delphyne, who is half maiden, half dragon; and a nameless snake-human hybrid female who gave Heracles three sons. Echidna: Hes. *Th.* 297–99; Delphyne: Apollod. *Bibl.* 2.1.2: “Δελφύνην δράκαιναν: ἡμίθηρ δὲ ἦν αὐτῇ ἡ κόρη”; Heracles: Hdt. 4.9.1–5. Such creatures also bring to mind Typhon and Echidna's offspring, the Chimera, who had a lion's head and a snake's tail (Ov. *Met.* 9.646–48), although in between, the head of a goat is usually depicted: e.g., a fourth-century BCE red-figure dish from Apulia (Louvre, Department of Greek, Etruscan and Roman Antiquities, Sully, accession number K 362, Campana Collection 1861). Snakes form the main theme of the second-century BCE *Theriaca* et *Alexipharmaca* by Nicander of Colophon (the latest edition is A. Touwaide, C. Förstel, and G. Aslanoff, eds., *Theriaka y Alexipharmaka di Nicandro* [Barcelona, 1997]).

5 Spier, “Medieval Byzantine Magical Amulets,” 44–45; idem, “A Revival of Antique Magical Practice in Tenth-Century Constantinople,” in *Magic and the Classical Tradition*, ed. C. Burnett and W. F. Ryan (London, 2006), 29–36; idem, “An Antique Magical Book Used for Making Sixth-Century Byzantine Amulets?” in *Les savoirs magiques et leur transmission de l'Antiquité à la Renaissance*, ed. V. Dasen and J. Spieser (Florence, 2014), 43–66.

the combination of animals similar to the animal comparison in the hystera formula always appears in conjunction with metamorphosis and mixanthropy.<sup>6</sup> I suggest that the uterus in need of calming was considered to be a metamorphic entity of its own. I propose that the hystera formula reflects the belief, already present in antiquity, that the uterus was “an animal within an animal” (ζῷον ἐν ζῷῳ),<sup>7</sup> and that looking at the motif and formula in conjunction with each other can open new lines of inquiry to the meaning of both the motif and the formula.

In my approach I will use the findings of Emma Aston, who has demonstrated, on one hand, a credible link between the literary accounts of metamorphosis and the focus on transformation *in fieri*, and on the other, pictorial depictions of metamorphosis and the focus on half-human, half-animal forms.<sup>8</sup> Much of the previous scholarship has treated the pictorial motif separately from the hystera formula and has concentrated on analyzing it solely on iconographic grounds.<sup>9</sup> I propose that the meaning of both the motif and the formula can be explained by looking at the two in combination, by synthesizing the iconographic and textual aspects. I believe the key lies in the interlocking and overlapping concepts of metamorphosis and mixanthropy, and the manner in which these were represented visually and textually.

In this paper I will concentrate on the hystera formula, analyzing a sample of sixty-two published amulets, compiled on the basis of Jeffrey Spier's 1993 catalogue, which is the most extensive listing of hystera

6 I use the term “mixanthropy,” coined by Emma Aston, to refer to the phenomenon of human-animal hybrids, and its derivative “mix-anthrope” to refer to human-animal hybrid creatures. For further discussion on this terminology, see Aston, *Mixanthrôpoi*, 13–14.

7 Quote from Aret. *De curatione acutorum morborum*, 2.11. In ancient sources, the uterus is said to have animalistic tendencies and an animal nature, and to be able to move around the body: Pl. *Ti.* 91c; Aret. *De causis et signis acutorum morborum*, 2.11; Hippocr. *De mulierum affectibus* 1.221, 2.125, 2.201; Sor. *Gyn.* 3.29 (Soranus criticizes the belief in the uterus as an animal with a will of its own); Gal. *De loc. aff.* 6.5; Gal. *De uteri dissectione* 4; PGM VII 260–71.

8 Aston, *Mixanthrôpoi*.

9 Spier, “Medieval Byzantine Magical Amulets”; idem, “Revival”; idem, “Antique Magical Book”; Vikan, “Art and Marriage”; idem, “Art, Medicine, and Magic in Early Byzantium,” *DOP* 38 (1984): 65–86.

amulets to date,<sup>10</sup> and two recently published new finds from Istanbul.<sup>11</sup>

### Uterine Iconography

The execution of the hystera motif varies. Sometimes the face and the snakes are depicted with much detail (fig. 1),<sup>12</sup> and in other cases in a stylized manner with the face as a simple circle or oval and the snakes as straight lines radiating outward from the face.<sup>13</sup>

The exact nature of the hystera motif has been the subject of much discussion ever since Campbell Bonner's pioneering work in the mid-twentieth century.<sup>14</sup> The main issue concerns the relationship of the Chnoubis figure to the hystera motif. Gary Vikan has maintained that the hystera motif is in fact Chnoubis (or at least a stylistically simplified version of it), an Egyptian figure thought to be of help with abdominal complaints.<sup>15</sup> Chnoubis was a typical character in astrological amulets as well as in healing



FIG. 1. Bronze pendant, State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, inv. no. ω-634 (photo courtesy State Hermitage Museum).

10 Spier, "Medieval Byzantine Magical Amulets." Spier's catalogue lists sixty amulets, plus one amulet in the addendum on page 62. I have excluded his amulet no. 45 as it has neither a recognizable hystera motif nor any remnants of a hystera formula nor any other mention of it being a uterine amulet. Spier says that the bezel might have a serpent ("Medieval Byzantine Magical Amulets," 57), whereas Davidson does not mention a serpent at all (G. R. Davidson, *Corinth*, vol. 12, *The Minor Objects* [Princeton, 1952], 244–45, no. 1953), and I cannot say I see one either. See also B. Pitarakis, ed., *Life Is Short, Art Long: The Art of Healing in Byzantium*, exhibition catalogue (Istanbul, 2015), 340, no. 98, for a new find identified as a hystera amulet (not included in the analysis of this article).

11 Z. Kiziltan and G. Baran Çelik, eds., *Stories from the Hidden Harbor: Shipwrecks of Yenikapı*, exhibition catalogue (Istanbul, 2013), 133, nos. 80–81.

12 E.g., Spier, "Medieval Byzantine Magical Amulets" nos. 1 (pl. 1a), 6 (pl. 1b), 12 (pl. 1c [= my fig. 1]), 25 (pl. 2c), mold-cast lead amulets, n. 35 (pl. 3c), a bronze amulet with inscriptions, n. 34 (pl. 3b), a silver amulet with inscriptions, nos. 53 (pl. 4f), 54 (pl. 4h), 52 (pl. 4i), gemstone amulets with inscriptions.

13 E.g., *ibid.*, nos. 8 (pl. 1c), 21 (pl. 2b), 30 (pl. 2e), all mold-cast lead amulets.

14 C. Bonner, "Magical Amulets," *HTR* 39 (1946): 25–54; *idem*, "Amulets Chiefly in the British Museum," *Hesperia* 20 (1951): 301–45; *idem*, *Studies in Magical Amulets, Chiefly Graeco-Egyptian* (Ann Arbor, 1950).

15 Vikan, "Art and Marriage"; *idem*, "Art, Medicine, and Magic."

amulets designed to ward off abdominal illnesses.<sup>16</sup> However, the character does not appear on its own in amulets that were meant solely for the protection of the uterus without the accompanying vase-shaped uterus symbol.<sup>17</sup> None of the hystera amulets combines a vase-like uterus symbol with the hystera motif.<sup>18</sup> In many cases the line between a Chnoubis and a hystera motif seems drawn arbitrarily.<sup>19</sup> The attempt to

16 "Chnoubis," *ODB* 1:425; A. Mastrocinque, *From Jewish Magic to Gnosticism* (Tübingen, 2005), 61–79. On the leontocephalic god, see I. S. Gilhus, *Animals, Gods and Humans: Changing Attitudes to Animals in Greek, Roman and Early Christian Ideas* (London, 2006), 236–38; V. Dasen and Á. M. Nagy, "Le serpent léontocéphale Chnoubis et la magie de l'époque romaine impériale," *Anthropozoologica* 47 (2012): 291–314.

17 Spier, "Medieval Byzantine Magical Amulets," 41.

18 See Bonner, "Amulets Chiefly," 327–30, for amulets with what is termed "Chnoubis" and a vase-like uterus symbol: nos. 24, 26 (British Museum, inv. no. 56479), 27 (British Museum, inv. no. 56543), 28 (British Museum, inv. no. 48954), 38 (British Museum, inv. no. 56252).

19 For example, Bonner, "Amulets Chiefly," pl. 97, 327–28, no. 27 (British Museum, inv. no. 56543); *idem*, "Magical Amulets," 54 (= my figure 2) no. 2 (Museum of the University of Michigan, inv. no. 96020); *idem*, "Amulets Chiefly," pl. 97, 326, no. 23; *ibid.*, pl. 97, 326, no. 24; *ibid.*, pl. 96, 321, no. 5 (British Museum, inv. no. 56526); *ibid.*, pl. 97, 328, no. 28 (British Museum, inv. no. 48954); *idem*, *Studies*,



FIG. 2. Saphirine chalcedony, Museum of the University of Michigan, inv. no. 96020 (from C. Bonner, "Magical Amulets," *HTR* 39 [1946]: fig. 2).

draw distinctions between motifs labeled "hystera" or "Chnoubis" on purely iconographical grounds seems unfruitful; I am not entirely convinced this is a meaningful distinction.

For the average Byzantine, there might have been a lot of confusion about the anatomical composition of the abdominal area. If in folk belief the uterus was able to move around the body and act as a sentient being, then the understanding of the anatomical difference between uterus and bowels must have been hazy at

pl. 5, 268, no. 96 (Bonner 14); *ibid.*, pl. 19, 313–14, no. 355 (Bonner 54). These eight amulets could easily be included in the same catalogue with many of the examples Spier lists, as they are almost indistinguishable from the more stylized versions of the hystera motif, while two pendants (= my figures 1 and 4) that are included in the Spier catalogue, and one ring (= my figure 3) in P. Orsi, *Sicilia bizantina* (Rome, 1942) that are either very rough or highly stylized could easily be classified as being Chnoubis instead of hystera ones.



FIG. 3. Bronze (?) ring of unknown provenance and location (drawing from P. Orsi, *Sicilia bizantina* [Rome, 1942], 152, fig. 68).

best.<sup>20</sup> This is reflected in several uterine amulets, where "there was evidently a marked uncertainty about the exact form of the ligaments and supplementary organs of the human uterus."<sup>21</sup> This could explain the conflation of the Chnoubis figure and the hystera motif. For complaints of the abdominal area, in everyday magical practice it did not matter very much which image was drawn on the amulet.<sup>22</sup>

In Byzantine amulets, the uterus is depicted in varying forms. The most common one is a vase-like symbol or cupping vessel, the mouth of which is surrounded with three, five, or seven teeth. Another form is the octopus.<sup>23</sup> The idea that the octopus was

20 The subject has been the focus of much modern research, among others L. Dean Jones, "The Cultural Construct of the Female Body in Classical Greek Science," in *Women's History & Ancient History*, ed. S. B. Pomeroy (Chapel Hill, 1991), 111–37; M. J. Adair, "Plato's View of the 'Wandering Uterus,'" *CJ* 91 (1996): 153–63; C. A. Faraone, "New Light on Ancient Greek Exorcisms of the Wandering Womb," *ZPapEpig* 144 (2003): 189–97; *idem*, "Magical and Medical" (n. 1 above).

21 A. A. Barb, "Diva Matrix: A Faked Gnostic Intaglio in the Possession of P. P. Rubens and the Iconology of a Symbol," *JWarb* 16 (1953): 193–238, 196 n. 54.

22 See Bonner's comment on the same magical motif not having the same meaning in all contexts: Bonner, "Magical Amulets," 50. However, animals could act as fixed symbols or shorthand for certain traits, as can be seen in animal fables. See Gilhus, *Animals, Gods and Humans*, 237–38.

23 V. Dasen, "Métamorphoses de l'utérus, d'Hippocrate à Ambroise Paré," *Gesnerus* 59 (2002): 167–86, 167–72. See also



another version of the vase- or bell-shaped uterus symbol was presented by Bonner.<sup>24</sup> Even earlier, Wilhelm Drexler suggested that the hystera motif symbolized the uterus.<sup>25</sup> Dasen drew a connection between these

V. Dasen and S. Ducate-Paarman, "Hysteria and Metaphors of the Uterus in Classical Antiquity," in *Images and Gender: Contributions to Hermeneutics of Reading Ancient Art*, ed. S. Schroer (Fribourg and Göttingen, 2006), 239–61. The octopus motif also appears on uterine intaglios between the first and fourth centuries CE, such as a second-century agate intaglio (Metropolitan Museum of Art accession number 10.130.1386), a third–fourth century (or modern copy) hematite intaglio (Harvard Art Museums/Arthur M. Sackler Museum object number 1983.25), a first–fourth century hematite intaglio with small images of Isis, Osiris, and Chnoubis (Harvard Art Museums/Arthur M. Sackler Museum object number 2012.1.155). See C. A. Faraone, "Text, Image and Medium: The Evolution of Graeco-Roman Magical Gemstones," in *Gems of Heaven: Recent Research on Engraved Gemstones in Late Antiquity, c. AD 200–600*, ed. C. Entwistle and N. Adams (London, 2011), 50–61; S. Michel, *Die magischen Gemmen: Zu Bildern und Zauberformeln auf geschnittenen Steinen der Antike und Neuzeit* (Berlin, 2004). Some gemstone uterine amulets are discussed in Bonner, "Amulets Chiefly" (n. 14 above; a black jasper amulet at the British Museum, inv. no. 56479, no. 26); B. A. Forbes, "The Princeton Art Museum's Collection of Classical and Classicizing Engraved Gemstones," *Record of the Art Museum, Princeton University* 54 (1995): 23–29 (three hematite amulets at the Princeton Art Museum, inv. numbers Y1970–78, Y1970–79, Y1970–81); R. K. Ritner, "A Uterine Amulet in the Oriental Institute Collection," *JNES* 43 (1984): 209–21 (one hematite amulet at the Oriental Institute, University of Chicago, inv. no. A.6832); and A. E. Hanson, "Uterine Amulets and Greek Uterine Medicine," *Medicina nei Secoli* 7 (1995): 281–99 (a hematite amulet). Tomlin discusses a fourth-century uterine phylactery inscribed on a lead sheet (R. S. O. Tomlin, "'Sede in tuo loco': A Fourth-Century Uterine Phylactery in Latin from Roman Britain," *ZPapEpiG* 115 [1997]: 291–94) and a third–fourth century gold tablet for "healthy childbirth" (idem, "Special Delivery: A Graeco-Roman Gold Amulet for Healthy Childbirth," *ZPapEpiG* 167 [2008]: 219–24). These amulets contain references to the movement of the uterus and charms that ask the uterus to be calm and remain in place, but they do not include any variants of the hystera formula. For a general view on uterine magic in antiquity, see J. Aubert, "Threatened Wombs: Aspects of Ancient Uterine Magic," *GRBM* 30 (1989): 412–49. See also A. Mastrocinque, *Les intailles magiques du Département des Monnaies, Médailles et Antiques* (Paris, 2014).

24 Bonner thought that the hystera motif, resembling "a crudely executed Medusa," derived from the octopus-shaped uterine symbol. Bonner, *Studies*, 79–92 (n. 14 above). See also Barb, "Diva Matrix," 217, n. 55.

25 W. Drexler, "Alte Beschwörungsformeln," *Philologus* 58 (1899): 594–616. Barb echoed the idea in 1953, drawing a connection between the "primeval womb," the sea, and the *gorgoneion* imagery. In his view, the primeval womb is analogous to the Abyss, or primordial sea, before the world was created. Barb suggests that the

two forms, showing that the octopus is a variant of the cupping vessel iconography, highlighting the animal nature of the uterus. The body of the vessel—symbolizing the bulk of the uterus—becomes the body of the octopus, while the teeth of the mouth of the cupping vessel—or in anatomical terms, the fallopian tubes—become tentacles. The odd number of tentacles—seven instead of eight—betrays their origin, the teeth of the cupping vessel image.<sup>26</sup> More importantly, ancient medical writers explicitly compare the uterus to an octopus.<sup>27</sup>

Instead of trying to make distinctions between hystera, Chnoubis, or octopus in the iconography of the amulets, I will approach the iconography of the amulets through the hystera formula and what its analysis can reveal about the meaning of the hystera motif.

## Uterine Formulas

Usually the iconographic motif appears on one side of the amulet and the textual formula on the other. Sometimes the formula circles the face motif. In such a case there is usually another inscription on the other side, either a repetition of the hystera formula, the Trisagion formula (which appears either in part or whole in thirteen of the sixty-two amulets in my analysis),<sup>28</sup> or something else. Of the amulets included in my analysis, thirty-five display the hystera motif without the hystera formula. There are no

*gorgoneion* might symbolize aspects—both positive and negative—of the "cosmogonic Mētra" (Barb, "Diva Matrix," 208–11). See also Spier, "Medieval Byzantine Magical Amulets" (n. 3 above), 43–44.

26 Dasen, "Métamorphoses de l'utérus," 8. The idea of the uterus as an octopus has been explored recently in A. Bonnell-Freidlin, "Birth and the Many-Legged Womb," talk given at the 146th Annual Meeting of Society for Classical Studies and Society for Ancient Medicine and Pharmacy, 10 January 2015. See the abstract, <http://apa.classics.org/annual-meeting/146/abstracts/anna-bonnell-freidlin>, p. 59 (accessed 20 July 2016).

27 Sor. *Gyn.* 1.4.67–72; Gal. *De semine* 1.7. P. P. Argenti and H. J. Rose, *The Folk-lore of Chios* (Cambridge, 1949), 270 records the belief still alive in Kambia in the early twentieth century, that the uterus could move around the body like an octopus (σάν χταπόδι). Precautions had to be taken after birth lest the uterus climb up to the throat and choke the mother. See also Bonner, "Amulets Chiefly," 315.

28 Spier, "Medieval Byzantine Magical Amulets," nos. 4, 7, 8, 9, 12, 15, 28, 34, 37, 56, 58, the addendum on page 62; Kiziltan and Baran Çelik, *Stories from the Hidden Harbor* (n. 11 above), no. 80.

examples of the reverse, a formula unaccompanied by the hystera motif. In total, twenty-six amulets have some variant of the hystera formula. Of the remaining thirty-six that do not feature the hystera formula, five contain other inscriptions indicating that they are uterine amulets (fig. 4).<sup>29</sup>

In what is considered the most standard form, the Byzantine hystera formula reads

ὕστερα μελάνη μελανωμένη ὡς ὄφεις εἰλύεσαι καὶ  
ὡς δράκον συνρίζησε καὶ ὡς λέων βρυχᾶσαι καὶ ὡς  
ἄρνιον κοιμοῦ

Womb, black, blackening, as a snake coil and as  
a serpent hiss and as a lion roar, and as a lamb,  
lie down!<sup>30</sup>

This repeated comparison of the uterus to different animals using the particle ὡς is a noteworthy feature of the hystera formula.<sup>31</sup> In every iteration of the formula, there is a comparison to a restless and violent animal or animals, most commonly the snake (ὄφεις or δράκον) and the lion (λέων or λέων), but sometimes also the bull (ταῦρος). The snake appears twice in many versions of the formula, first as ὄφεις and then as δράκον, while the verb following the snake is different, first coiling or slithering (ὡς ὄφεις εἰλύεσαι) and then hissing (ὡς δράκον συνρίζησε). In ten known hystera amulets this is followed with comparison to a calm, docile animal: a lamb (ἄρνιον) or a sheep (προβάτον). Two amulets substitute the sea for



FIG. 4. Lead pendant. The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, inv. no. ω-1159 (photo courtesy State Hermitage Museum).

the lamb and ask the uterus to be “calm like the sea.”<sup>32</sup> It seems clear that the basic meaning of the formula was to describe the animalistic behavior of the uterus, and then command it to calm down.<sup>33</sup>

The hystera formula belongs to a long tradition of inscriptions in which disease-causing (often female) demons are compared to animals. To mention only two examples, a silver amulet against migraine from Carnuntum addresses a female demon named Antaura.<sup>34</sup> She “shouted aloud like a hind, she cried

29 Spier, “Medieval Byzantine Magical Amulets,” nos. 8 (ΠΡΟΣ ΟΦΕΛΙΑΝ ΥΣΤΕΡΑΣ), 9 (= my fig. 4; ΓΡΑΦΙ ΥΣΤΕΡΑ Ι ΑΓΙΑ ΜΑΡΙΑ ΒΟΙΘΙ), 10 (ΗΣΤΕΡΙΚΟ ΦΙΛΑ ΚΤΥΡΙΟ), 40 ([Υ]ΣΤΕΡΗΚΩΝ ΦΥΛΑΚΤΗΡΙΟΝ), 44 (. . . ΤΕΡΗ . . . ΕΟΝΦΥ) perhaps originally (ΥΣΤΕΡΗΚΕΟΝ ΦΥΛΑΚΤΕΡΙΟΝ).

30 Translation *ibid.*, 29, 44, with modifications. The aspect of blackness is interesting. It could be due to chthonic associations, or simply a practical note (blood turns black due to oxidation). The question merits its own discussion and will not be handled in this paper.

31 Spier notes echoes of the animal comparison formula in *PGM* VII 260–71, in the phrase “do not gnaw into the heart like a dog.” The spell is meant to serve against the ascent of the uterus (πρὸς μήτρας ἀναδρομήν). The spell addresses the uterus and commands it to return to its proper place. Spier remarks most poignantly that the formulaic animal comparison originates from a common prototype (Spier, “Medieval Byzantine Magical Amulets,” 45). For more examples of spells with the phrase “gnaw/bite like a dog,” see Faraone, “New Light” (n. 20 above).

32 See Spier, “Medieval Byzantine Magical Amulets,” amulet nos. 56 and 57. The former, an engraved green jasper intaglio, bears the inscription ΩΣ ΘΑΛΑΤΤΑΝ ΓΑΛΗΝΗCΑΙΝΕΙ, while the latter, an engraved bloodstone, reads ΟC ΘΑΛΑCΑ ΓΑΛΗΝΗCΟΝ. Interestingly, one uses the Attic *thalatta* while the other uses the Ionic *thalassa*.

33 It must be noted that the formula uses verbs in the imperative, giving the impression that it first aims to excite the uterus before calming it down. The objective of the formula was to calm down the uterus that was already acting up and being wild (roaming around the body, not being fertile, or cramping), not to agitate it. Using magical logic, by commanding the uterus to do what it is already doing, the formula creates the illusion of being in control of the behavior of the uterus. Since the uterus acted wild with the commands to roar like a lion and coil like a snake, by commanding it to lie down and calm like a lamb, it should then do so as well.

34 A. A. Barb, “Antaura: The Mermaid and the Devil’s Grandmother: A Lecture,” *JWarb* 29 (1966): 1–23, at 3–7. The name comes from *anti* and *aura* (“spirit, breath”). The abbreviated form *abra* is

out like a cow” (ἀνεβοήσε ὡς ἔλαφος ἀνέκραξε ὡς βοῦς).<sup>35</sup> In the other example, a sixth-century bronze pendant from Palestine, a similar formula is found. According to the inscription, the amulet belonged to a woman named Babina. The diseases that the pendant was supposed to protect Babina from are likened to a lion, a bull, and a snake.<sup>36</sup>

There is a group of Syrian and Palestinian bronze amulets from the sixth–seventh centuries that have a magical formula bearing some similarity to the Byzantine hystera formula.<sup>37</sup> While they do not address the hystera directly, as the Byzantine hystera amulets do, a similar structure of animal comparison can be found. Campbell Bonner discusses a specimen—a bronze pendant<sup>38</sup> with an inscription, transcribed and translated by Bonner as follows:

λιμός σε ἔσπ<ε>ιρεν. ἀήρ ἐθήρισεν. φλέψ <σ>ε  
κατέφαγεν. τί ὡς λύκος μασᾷσε; τί ὡς κορκόδυλλος  
ταπίννις; τί ὡς λέων βρώχης; τί ὡς ταῦρος κερατίζις;  
τί ὡς δράκων εἰλίσσι; τί ὡς παρᾶος κυμᾷσε;

also attested in Byzantine amulets. Often these types of demons are vanquished with the help of the names of saints. Barb suggests ἄβρός as the root, but concludes that it most likely is a Semitic loan. In Byzantine Greek both “aura” and “abra” would have been pronounced the same way, and the confusion could simply arise from the subpar literacy of the scribes.

35 Barb, *ibid.*, 2, 6, 15–16, n. 14, also references Lucan’s *Pharsalia*, a modern Arabic incantation, and an Italian medieval charm, all with the same content and structure, albeit with different animals. A charm against a headache (*PGM XX* 13–19, “The charm of the Thessalian Philinna”) compares the fleeing of the headache to the flight of a lion, wolves, and horses. For the silver migraine amulet mentioned by Barb, see also Faraone, “Magical and Medical Approaches” (n. 1 above), 12–13. For the tradition of the formula, see F. Lenormant, “Une incantation magique chaldéenne,” *RA* 34 (1877): 254–62, and Faraone, “Magical and Medical Approaches,” 15–16.

36 O. M. Dalton, *Catalogue of the Early Christian Antiquities and Objects from the Christian East in the Department of British and Mediaeval Antiquities and Ethnography of the British Museum* (London, 1901), 112, no. 555.

37 For a good overview on these Syrian and Palestinian bronze amulets, see Spier, “Medieval Byzantine Magical Amulets,” 44–45, 60–62 (appendix 2) and pl. 6.

38 British Museum registration number 56324/Spier, “Medieval Byzantine Magical Amulets,” amulet on pl. 6f.

Hunger sowed you, air harvested you, vein devoured you. Why do you munch like a wolf, why do you devour like a crocodile, why do you roar like a lion, why do you gore like a bull, why do you coil like a serpent, why do you lie down like a tame creature?<sup>39</sup>

This formula makes comparisons to six animals using the particle ὡς, four of which will later be central in the Byzantine hystera formula (lion, bull, snake, and “tame creature”<sup>40</sup>). The theme of various animals of a restless and violent sort is much older than the sixth–seventh centuries, as I will demonstrate in the next section of the paper—however, the addition of a docile animal or element, the lamb or the sea, is likely to be a sixth–seventh century invention.

The already familiar “ὑστέρα μελάνη μελανωμένη” structure is also found in a nineteenth-century manuscript, recorded in *Anecdota Atheniensia*, that preserves a charm with the following title: Πῶς νὰ γράφης ἄστέρα διὰ μικρὰ παιδία, “How to draw the hystera for [the benefit of] small children.” It instructs to surround the image of a snake with the inscription (*figura serpentis inscriptione circumdata*):

ἄστέρα μελάνη μελανωμένη, αἷμα τρώγεις, αἷμα πίνεις, ἔς τὸ αἷμα συντελείεσαι, φεῦγε, ῥίγος, ἀπὸ τὸν δούλον τοῦ Θεοῦ ὁδεῖνα καὶ τάξω σοι πέντε πίνακα μέλι καὶ πέντε πίνακα γάλα νὰ τρώγης καὶ νὰ πίνης φεῦγε, ῥίγος, ἀπὸ τὸν δούλον τοῦ Θεοῦ ὁδεῖνα. ἀμήν. ς. κ. ς. φ. Θ. ἀμήν.

Womb, black, blackening, eating blood, drinking blood. As blood congeals, flee, frost, by the servant of God so-and-so and I lay out for you five plates of honey and five plates of milk to eat and to drink. Flee, frost, by the servant of God so-and-so. Amen. s. k. s. ph. Th. Amen.<sup>41</sup>

39 Bonner, *Studies*, 217–18; *idem*, “Amulets Chiefly” (both n. 14 above), 334–35, amulet no. 51/British Museum registration number 56324. This particular inscription has most recently been discussed in Spier, “Antique Magical Book” (n. 5 above), 56.

40 Bonner reads παρᾶος as παρᾶος, which is often translated as “mild,” “soft,” “gentle,” or “meek.” Bonner, “Amulets Chiefly,” 335.

41 My translation. A. Delatte, ed., *Anecdota Atheniensia I* (Liège and Paris, 1927), 141, lines 22–29 (MS no. 12.4, Bibliothèque du Sénat).



The inscription addresses the uterus (ἄστέρα) at first, but then switches to address frost (ῥίγος). The idea seems to be to discourage the uterus from eating and drinking blood by laying out plates of milk and honey instead.<sup>42</sup>

The hystera formula is not encountered in the “full” form cited by Spier until the tenth century, when the use of amulets increased (or at least the number of finds does).<sup>43</sup> The concept of “fullness” needs to be qualified somewhat. The “full” form is encountered only once in the actual amulets.<sup>44</sup> Is it really possible, then, to pick this one form out as the full one, effectively saying that all the other, more common ones, are an aberration from the norm? There are other elements in the formula variants that

According to Barb, “ἄστέρα” is a corruption of “ὑστέρα.” Barb, “Diva Matrix” (n. 21 above), 237, note 301.

42 This drinking of milk could be related to the role mother’s milk has in a narrative charm (*historiola*) against the child-killing demon Gello. The charm has survived in several versions, with the earliest manuscripts dated in the fifteenth century, and the latest versions from the late nineteenth or the twentieth century. The story is meant to act as an exorcism against the demon, and provides a prayer with a list of saints as well as instructions for making an amulet that will ward her off. The main characters are Melitene and her brothers, Saints Sisinnios and Sisynodoros. The basic outline of the story is as follows: Melitene’s previous children have been killed by Gello. Melitene is now pregnant again and tries to protect herself and her unborn child by sealing herself in a fortress. Melitene’s brothers come to visit her but Melitene hesitates to let them in, fearing that Gello will come with them. She finally lets her brothers in, but her fears are realized as Gello slips in under a disguise. Gello either kills or steals (depending on the version) Melitene’s child and flees, the saints pursuing her. They reach Gello and strike a bargain with the demon: she will give back Melitene’s children if the saints give her their own mother’s milk—depending on the version, either by regurgitating it from their mouths or producing it from the palms of their hands. In one manuscript version, SA1 (from K. Sathas, *Μεσαιωνική Βιβλιοθήκη Ε’* [Venice and Paris, 1876], 573–75), it is Melitene’s milk that the demon requires. For a detailed study of this charm and its manuscript tradition, see R. P. H. Greenfield, “Saint Sisinnios, the Archangel Michael and the Female Demon Gylou: The Typology of the Greek Literary Stories,” *Βυζαντινά* 15 (1989): 83–142, especially 91–93, 98, and note 32 on page 101.

43 From the Late Roman and Early Byzantine periods there are no amulets, lamellae, or papyri where the hystera formula is presented in full. Spier, “Medieval Byzantine Magical Amulets” (n. 3 above), 31, 33, 50.

44 Ibid., amulet no. 54 (pl. 4g–h) (ΥΣΤΕΡ ΜΕΛΑΝΙ ΜΕΛΑΝΟΜΕΛΙ Η ΜΕΛΑΝ. ΟΣ ΟΦΗΣ ΗΛΗΕΣ ΚΕ ΟΣ ΔΑΡΚΟΝ ΣΥΡΧΗΖΗΣ ΚΕ ΟΣ ΛΕΟ ΒΥΡΧΑΞΕ Κ ΟΣ ΑΡΝΗΟΝ ΚΥΜΗΘΗΤ).

are not included in this full form: the sea,<sup>45</sup> a bull,<sup>46</sup> smoke,<sup>47</sup> and a woman.<sup>48</sup> The most stable combination of elements is indeed the “snake + lion + lamb” permutation (either with one [ὄφις *or* δράκον] or two [ὄφις *and* δράκον] snakes), corresponding to the formula variant deemed as the one occurring “in full.” Yet it is important to note that the most common is not the same as the “fullest.”

## Elements of the Hystera Formula in Earlier Sources

The combination of three animals found in the hystera formula—a bull, a lion (or leopard), and a snake—occurs several times in the Greek literary corpus. The long history of the formula and transmission through magical handbooks is well known,<sup>49</sup> but additionally it seems that parts of the formula were borrowed from non-magical sources. When this combination of animals occurs in classical sources, it is in a decidedly non-magical context.<sup>50</sup> The combination is first observed

45 Ibid., amulet nos. 56 (ΥΣΤΕΡΑ ΜΕΛΑΙΝΗ ΜΕΛΑΙΝΟΜΕΝΗ ΩΣ ΘΑΛΑΤΤΑΝ ΓΑΛΛΗΝΗCΑΙΝΕΙ) and 57 (ΗCΤΕΡΑ ΜΕΛΑΙΝΗ ΜΕΛΑΝΟΜΕΝΙ ΟC ΟΦΗΣ ΚΗΛΗCΕ ΟC ΘΑΛΑCΑ ΓΑΛΗΝΗCΟΝ ΟC ΠΡΟΒΑΤΟΝ ΠΡΑΙΝ ΚΕ ΟC ΚΑΤΝΟC).

46 Ibid., amulet no. 15 (Pl. 2a) (ΥCΤΕΡΑ ΜΕΛΑΙΝΗ ΜΕΛΑΝΟΜ . . . ΤΙ ΟC ΟΦΙC ΙΛΙΕΕ ΤΙ ΟC . . . ΤΙ C ΜΕΤΑΚΠΙ ΤΙ ΟC ΤΑΥΡΟC ΟΡΥΑCΕ ΩC ΠΡΟ . . ΤΟΝ ΚΥΜ).

47 I am speculating that “κατνος” means καπνός in the following amulet: ibid., amulet no. 57 (pl. 5c) (ΗCΤΕΡΑ ΜΕΛΑΙΝΗ ΜΕΛΑΝΟΜΕΝΙ ΟC ΟΦΗΣ ΚΗΛΗCΕ ΟC ΘΑΛΑCΑ ΓΑΛΗΝΗCΟΝ ΟC ΠΡΟΒΑΤΟΝ ΠΡΑΙΝ ΚΕ ΟC ΚΑΤΝΟC).

48 Ibid., amulet no. 34 (pl. 3b) (ΥCΤΕΡΑ ΜΕΛΑΙΝΗ ΜΕΛΑΝΟΜΕΝΗ ΕΜΑΝ ΤΡΟΗ ΕΜΑΝ ΠΗ ΟC ΟΦΗΣ ΗΛΗCΕ ΟC ΛΕΟΝ ΟΡΥΑCΕ ΟC ΗΡΟΡΑΤΟΝ ΚΥΜΟΥ ΟC ΓΥΝΗΙ).

49 Ibid., 44–51.

50 About 300 medieval manuscripts of the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* survive dating from the ninth to the fifteenth century, and Byzantine commentaries and annotations to Homer from the eleventh century survive (*Homer in Print: The Transmission and Reception of Homer’s Works*, University of Chicago Library Web Exhibit: <http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/e/webexhibits/homerinprint/preprint.html>; E. Dickey, *Ancient Greek Scholarship* [Oxford, 2007], 21, 23, 66, 73; L. D. Reynolds and N. G. Wilson, *Scribes and Scholars* [Oxford, 1991], 58). There is a considerable number of Byzantine commentaries and scholia of Hesiod from Ioannes Diaconus Galenus, Triclinius, and Ioannes Tzetzes (Reynolds and Wilson, *Scribes and Scholars*, 71; Dickey, *Scholarship*, 30, 41), as well as manuscripts, scholia, commentaries of the plays of Aristophanes, Sophocles, and Euripides (Dickey, *Scholarship*, 30–43; Reynolds and Wilson, *Scribes and Scholars*, 61,



not in magical handbooks but in the context of the classical epics and plays, from which it was lifted into magical usage.<sup>51</sup> In these classical sources, the combination occurs always in connection with a depiction of metamorphosis or a mixanthropic being. This pattern offers a clue on the meaning of the motif: that the uterus ordered to calm down in the amulets was thought to be a living being, capable of metamorphosis.

The first examples come from Hesiod and Homer. The earliest mention of this combination of animals is Typhoeus from Hesiod's *Theogony* (824–35):

ἐκ δὲ οἱ ὤμων ἦν ἑκατὸν κεφαλὰι ὄφις, δεινοῖο  
δράκοντος, γλώσσησιν δνοφερῇσι λελιχμότες, ἐκ  
δὲ οἱ ὄσσων θεσπεσίης κεφαλῇσιν ὑπ' ὀφρύσι πῦρ  
ἀμάρυσσεν: πασέων δ' ἐκ κεφαλῶν πῦρ καίετο  
δερκομένοιο: φωναὶ δ' ἐν πάσῃσιν ἔσαν δεινῆς  
κεφαλῇσι παντοίῃν ὅπ' ἰεῖσαι ἀθέσφατον: ἄλλοτε  
μὲν γὰρ φθέγγονθ' ὥστε θεοῖσι συνιέμεν, ἄλλοτε  
δ' αὐτε ταύρου ἐριβρύχῳ, μένος ἀσκέτου, ὄσσαν

66, 70, 76). Ovid was translated into Greek by Maximus Planoudes (Reynolds and Wilson, *Scribes and Scholars*, 100, 74). See also J. S. Codoñer and I. P. Martín, eds., *Textual Transmission in Byzantium: Between Textual Criticism and Quellenforschung* (Turnhout, 2014); S. Gioanni and B. Grévin, eds., *L'antiquité tardive dans les collections médiévales: Textes et représentations, VI<sup>e</sup>–XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Rome, 2008); M. Przemyslaw, *Greek Drama in Byzantine Times* (Katowice, 2004); A. Valvo, ed., *La diffusione dell'eredità classica nell'età tardoantica e medievale: Forme e modi di trasmissione* (Alessandria, 1997). Spier's idea that the amulets were used mainly by the upper classes seems right. Even though it is possible that the lower classes used amulets of lesser quality in equal measures to the wealthier population, but that their low-quality amulets disintegrated over time, the connection of the amulets' inscriptions to the classical heritage makes this doubtful. Classical epics and plays that influenced the hystera formula were known in the Byzantine Empire, but familiarity with these texts was confined mainly to the upper, educated classes. I am inclined to agree with the view presented in Spier, "Revival" (n. 5 above), that the Byzantine hystera amulets should be seen largely in the context of a cultural revival in which the elite displayed a new-found interest in the classical heritage.

51 A reference to shape-shifting contains a list of animals and objects that one can transform into in *PGM XIII* 270–77: "Make me seem to be, to the eyes of all creatures—a wolf, dog, lion, fire, tree, vulture, wall, water, or whatever you want." This passage has been recently studied in detail by R. L. Phillips: "Traditions of Transformation and Shape-Shifting in *PGM XIII* 270–77," talk presented at *Cultural Plurality in Ancient Magical Texts and Practices*, 12–13 September 2014 at the Internationales Wissenschaftsforum Heidelberg.

ἀγαύρου, ἄλλοτε δ' αὐτε λέοντος ἀναιδέα θυμὸν  
ἔχοντος, ἄλλοτε δ' αὖ σκυλάκεσσιν εἰκότα,  
θαύματ' ἀκούσαι, ἄλλοτε δ' αὖ ροίξεσχ', ὑπὸ δ'  
ἤχεεν οὔρεα μακρά.

From his shoulders there were a hundred heads of a snake, a terrible dragon's, licking with their dark tongues; and on his prodigious heads fire sparkled from his eyes under the eyebrows, and from all of his heads fire burned as he glared. And there were voices in all his terrible heads, sending forth all kinds of sounds, inconceivable: for sometimes they would utter sounds as though for the gods to understand, and at other times the sound of a loud-bellowing, majestic bull, unstoppable in its strength, at other times that of a lion, with a ruthless spirit, at other times like young dogs, a wonder to hear, and at other times he hissed, and the high mountains echoed from below.<sup>52</sup>

Aston points out Typhoeus among the monstrous beings described in *Theogonia* as "essentially mixanthropic."<sup>53</sup> Not only is he mixanthropic, but the voices he displays are the same as the ones mentioned in the variants of the hystera formula—bellowing like a bull, roaring like a lion, and hissing like a snake. To this is added the image of "a hundred heads of a snake" growing from his head ("ἐκ δὲ οἱ ὤμων ἦν ἑκατὸν κεφαλὰι ὄφις"), resulting in an exact literary foreshadowing of the hystera motif and formula.

In Homer's *Odyssey*, Proteus's daughter Eidothea gives advice to Odysseus, who is stranded in Egypt with his crew, to hide in seal skins and wait for the old man of the sea.<sup>54</sup> Odysseus follows her instructions and captures Proteus (*Hom. Od.* 4.454–58):

ἡμεῖς δὲ ἰάχοντες ἐπεσσύμεθ', ἀμφὶ δὲ χεῖρας  
βάλλομεν: οὐδ' ὁ γέρων δολίης ἐπελήθετο τέχνης,  
ἀλλ' ἦ τοι πρότιστα λῆων γένετ' ἠυγένειος, αὐτὰρ

52 Translation by G. W. Most, ed. and trans., *Hesiod, vol. 1, Theogony; Works and Days; Testimonia*, Loeb (Cambridge, MA, 2007). Strabo (*Geografia* 16.2.7) also briefly mentions Typhon, saying only that he was a snake, "εἶναι δὲ δράκοντα."

53 Aston, *Mixanthropoi* (n. 4 above), 35–36.

54 *Hom. Od.* 4.360–99.

ἔπειτα δράκων καὶ πάρδαλις ἡδὲ μέγας σῦς:  
γίγνεται δ' ὕγρον ὕδωρ καὶ δένδρεον ὑψιπέτηλον.

We rushed upon him with a shout, and threw our arms about him; nor did that old man forget his crafty wiles, but first he turned into a bearded lion, and then into a serpent, and a leopard, and a huge boar; then he turned into flowing water, and into a tree, high and leafy.<sup>55</sup>

Here we can see the forms Proteus changes into include those of a lion (as well as a leopard) and a snake<sup>56</sup>—both animals found in the Syro-Palestinian and Byzantine amulet formulas.<sup>57</sup>

These are far from the sole occurrences in the Greek and Latin literary corpus—there are several mentions in classical plays (though none from Aeschylus). In Aristophanes' *Clouds* Socrates asks, "Have you ever looked up and seen a cloud resembling a centaur, or a leopard, or a wolf, or a bull?"<sup>58</sup> A line later he explains this is because "They become all things, whatever they please" (γίγνονται πάνθ' ὅ τι βούλονται), meaning that the clouds metamorphose as they wish. Euripides's *Ion*

55 Translation by A. T. Murray, ed. and trans., *Homer: Odyssey*, vol. 1, *Books 1–12*, Loeb (Cambridge, MA, 1919).

56 Almost the exact same scene unfolds with Thetis, daughter of another sea god, Nereus (Apollod. *Bibl.* 3.13.5): Χείρωνος οὖν ὑποθεμένου Πηλεΐ συλλαβεῖν καὶ κατασχεῖν αὐτὴν μεταμορφουμένην, ἐπιτηρήσας συναρπάξει, γινομένην δὲ ὅτε μὲν πῦρ ὅτε δὲ ὕδωρ ὅτε δὲ θηρίον οὐ πρότερον ἀνῆκε πρὶν ἢ τὴν ἀρχαίαν μορφήν εἶδεν ἀπολαβοῦσαν. "Chiron, therefore, having advised Peleus to seize her and hold her fast in spite of her shape-shifting, he watched his chance and carried her off, and though she turned, now into fire, now into water, and now into a beast, he did not let her go till he saw that she had resumed her former shape." Translation by J. G. Frazer, ed. and trans., *Apollodorus: The Library*, vol. 2, *Book 3.10–end; Epitome*, Loeb (Cambridge, MA, 1921). In Pindar's *Nemean Ode* (4.60–65), Thetis changes to a fire and a lion.

57 Verses of Homer were also used as amulets and included in magical spells, both in antiquity and in later times. Examples from *Papyri Graecae Magicae* include XXIIa 1, XXIIa 2–9, XXIIa 9–10, XXIIa 11–14, and XXIIa 15–17. Another example that includes Homeric verse is a third-century CE amulet, no. 29 in M. C. Ross, ed. (addendum by S. A. Boyd and S. R. Zwirn), *Catalogue of the Byzantine and Early Mediaeval Antiquities in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection*, vol. 2, *Jewelry, Enamels, and Art of the Migration* (Washington, DC, 2005).

58 Ar. *Nub.* 349–50: ἡδὲ ποτ' ἀναβλέψας εἶδες νεφέλην κενταύρω ὁμοίαν, ἢ παρδαλεῖ ἢ λύκῳ ἢ ταύρῳ; translation by J. Henderson, ed. and trans., *Aristophanes*, vol. 2, *Clouds; Wasps; Peace*, Loeb (Cambridge, MA, 1998).

does not feature the bull, lion, and snake in a formulaic pattern, but does combine a tauromorphic Cephissus with snakes and the Gorgon,<sup>59</sup> and in his *Orestes* the bull-faced Oceanus (Eur. *Or.* 1375–79: "Ὠκεανὸς δὲ ταυρόκρανος") makes an appearance.

In the case of Cephissus and Oceanus the mix-anthropy of a human and a bull is mentioned, but the formulaic pattern of a metamorphosis into different animals is not present. However, both mixanthropy and metamorphosis are demonstrated by the similarly tauromorphic Acheloüs in Sophocles's *Trachinian Women*. The river god comes to ask Deianeira's hand and transforms himself into a bull, a snake, and finally into a mixed creature of bull and man (Soph. *Trach.* 9–13):

μνηστήρ γὰρ ἦν μοι ποταμός, Ἀχελῶν λέγω,  
ὅς μ' ἐν τρισὶν μορφαῖσιν ἐξήτει πατρός, φοιτῶν  
ἐναργῆς ταῦρος, ἄλλοτ' αἰόλος δράκων ἐλικτός,  
ἄλλοτ' ἀνδρείῳ κύτει βούπρωρος.

For I had as a wooer a river, I mean Achelous, who came in three shapes to ask my father for me, at some times manifest as a bull, at others as a darting, coiling serpent, and again at others with a man's trunk and a bull's head; and from his shaggy beard there poured streams of water from his springs.<sup>60</sup>

Ovid narrates the fight between Acheloüs and Heracles for Deianeira, and describes how during the fight, Acheloüs changed his shape—first from man to snake, then from snake to bull—in order to get the best of Heracles.<sup>61</sup> Strabo mentions both Sophocles's play

59 Eur. *Ion* 1261–65: ὦ ταυρόμορφον ὄμμα Κηφισοῦ πατρός, οἶαν ἔχιδναν τήνδ' ἔφυσας ἢ πυρὸς δράκοντ' ἀναβλέποντα φοινίαν φλόγα, ἢ τόλμα πᾶσ' ἔνεστιν, οὐδ' ἥσσω ἐφύ Γοργοῦς σταλαγμῶν, οἷς ἐμελλέ με κτενεῖν. "O Cephissus, bull-faced river god, her ancestor, what a viper you have begotten in her, a snake with murderous fire in its glance! She stops at nothing and is more dangerous than the drops of Gorgon blood with which she meant to kill me!" Translation by D. Kovacs, ed. and trans., *Euripides*, vol. 4, *Trojan Women; Iphigenia among the Taurians; Ion*, Loeb (Cambridge, MA, 1999).

60 Translation by H. Lloyd-Jones, ed. and trans., *Sophocles*, vol. 2, *Antigone; The Women of Trachis; Philoctetes; Oedipus at Colonus*, Loeb (Cambridge, MA, 1994).

61 Ov. *Met.* 9.60–81: Tum denique tellus pressa genu nostro est, et harenas ore momordi. Inferior virtute meas divertor ad artes, elaborque viro longum formatus in anguem. Qui postquam flexos sinuavi corpus in orbes cumque fero movi linguam stridore

and the fight between Heracles and Acheloüs, and also gives an explanation for the god's shape-shifting: that the waters of River Acheloüs roared "like a bull" and the river twisted "like a serpent."<sup>62</sup> Ovid also describes a scene where "a Calydonian River-God" (*Calydonius amnis*)—Acheloüs, that is—talks to Proteus, another shape shifter (Ov. *Met.* 732–37):

Nam modo te iuvenem, modo te videre leonem;  
nunc violentus aper, nunc, quem tetigisse time-  
rent, anguis eras, modo te faciebant cornua  
taurum. Saepe lapis poteras, arbor quoque  
saepe videri; interdum, faciem liquidarum  
imitatus aquarum, flumen eras, interdum undis  
contrarius ignis.

For now men saw thee as a youth, now as a lion;  
now thou wast a raging boar, now a serpent  
whom men would fear to touch; now horns  
made thee a bull; often thou couldst appear as a  
stone, often, again, a tree; sometimes, assuming  
the form of flowing water, thou wast a stream,  
and sometimes a flame, the water's enemy.<sup>63</sup>

bisulcam . . . Sic quoque devicto restabat tertia tauri forma truci: tauro mutatus membra rebello. "I bit the sand. So, worsted in my strength, I sought diversion by an artifice, and changed me to a serpent.—I then slipped from his tight clutches my great length, and coiled my body now transformed to snaky folds—hissing I darted my divided tongue. . . . Twice was I vanquished, there remained to me a third form so again I changed to seem a savage bull, and with my limbs renewed in that form fought once more." Translation by B. More, *Ovid: Metamorphoses* (Boston, 1922).

62 Str. *Geografia* 10.2.19: προστιθέασιν δ' ἔνιοι καὶ τὸ τῆς Ἀμαλθείας τοῦτ' εἶναι λέγοντες κέρασ, ὃ ἀπέκλασεν ὁ Ἡρακλῆς τοῦ Ἀχελώου καὶ ἔδωκεν Οἰνεῖ τῶν γάμων ἔδνον: οἱ δ' εἰκάζοντες ἐξ αὐτῶν τάληθες ταύρω μὲν εἰκότα λέγεσθαι τὸν Ἀχελών φασι, καθάπερ καὶ τοὺς ἄλλους ποταμούς, ἀπὸ τε τῶν ἡχῶν καὶ τῶν κατὰ τὰ ρεῖθρα καμπῶν, ἅς καλοῦσι κέρατα, δράκοντι δὲ διὰ τὸ μῆκος καὶ τὴν σκολιότητα, βούπρωρον δὲ διὰ τὴν αὐτὴν αἰτίαν δι' ἣν καὶ ταυρωπόν. "Some writers add to the myth, saying that this was the horn of Amaltheia, which Heracles broke off from Acheloüs and gave to Oeneus as a wedding gift. Others, conjecturing the truth from the myths, say that the Acheloüs, like the other rivers, was called 'like a bull' from the roaring of its waters, and also from the the bendings of its streams, which were called Horns, and 'like a serpent' because of its length and windings, and 'with front of ox' for the same reason that he was called 'bull-faced.'" Translation by H. L. Jones, ed. and trans., *The Geography of Strabo*, vol. 5, Loeb (Cambridge, MA, 1924).

63 Translation by F. J. Miller, ed. and trans., Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, vol. 1, *Books 1–8*, Loeb (Cambridge, MA, 1916).

## Dionysus and Metamorphosis

With none other is the capability of metamorphosis so connected with the formulaic repetition of these same animal forms as it is with Dionysus.<sup>64</sup> In Euripides' *Bacchae* the chorus addresses Dionysus: "Show yourself as a bull in appearance or a many-headed serpent or a lion blazing like fire!"<sup>65</sup>

Antoninus Liberalis records in his *Metamorphoses* (Μεταμορφώσεων Συναγωγή) the myth of the Minyades, daughters of Minyas—Alcathoe, Leucippe and Arsippe—who refuse to join Dionysus's worship as Bacchae.<sup>66</sup> Dionysus then frightens them out of their minds by turning first into a bull, then into a lion, and finally into a leopard. The result is a Dionysiac madness, which drives the Minyades to first tear apart Leucippe's own son Hippasus, and then to run off as Bacchae—members of the very cult that they refused to join in the first place.<sup>67</sup> They wander about until

64 Athenaeus has a practical explanation for this facet of Dionysus's personality (Ath. 2.7): ἀπὸ τοῦ κατὰ μέθην δὲ καταστήματος καὶ ταύρω παρεικάζουσι τὸν Διόνυσον καὶ παρδάλει διὰ τὸ πρὸς βίαν τρέπεσθαι τοὺς ἐξοινωθέντας. Ἀλκαῖος: ἄλλοτε μὲν μελιαδέος, ἄλλοτε δ' ὀξυτέρου τριβόλων ἀρυττημένοι. εἰσὶ δ' οἱ καὶ θυμικοὶ γίνονται: τοιοῦτος δ' ὁ ταῦρος. Εὐριπίδης: ταῦροι δ': ὑβριστὰὶ κεῖς κέρασ θυμούμενοι. διὰ δὲ τὸ μάχιμον καὶ θηριώδεις ἔνιοι γίνονται: ὅθεν καὶ τὸ παρδαλώδες. "They compare Dionysus to a bull because of the condition drunks are in, and to a leopard because those who consume too much wine are prone to violence. Alcaeus (fr. 369): sometimes drawing themselves wine sweet as honey, at other times some with a bite harsher than brambles. Some people become quarrelsome; this is what a bull is like. Euripides (*Ba.* 743): bulls that were violent, with anger in their horns. And because they like to fight, some become like wild animals; hence the comparison to a leopard." Translation by S. D. Olson, ed. and trans., *Athenaeus, The Learned Banqueters*, vol. 1, *Books 1–3*, 106e, Loeb (Cambridge, MA, 2007).

65 E. *Ba.* 1018–19: φάνηθι ταῦρος ἢ πολύκρανος ἰδεῖν δράκων ἢ πυριφλέγων ὀρᾶσθαι λέων. Translation by D. Kovacs, ed. and trans., *Euripides*, vol. 6, *Bacchae; Iphigenia at Aulis; Rhesus*, Loeb (Cambridge, MA, 2003).

66 See also A. Bernabé, "Metamorphosis metamorphoseos: Dionysos and the Daughters of Minyas" in *Metamorfosi tra scienza e letteratura*, ed. F. Citti, L. Pasetti, and D. Pellacani (Florence, 2015), 1–13.

67 Ant. Lib. *Met.* 10; F. Celoria, trans., *The Metamorphoses of Antoninus Liberalis* (London and New York, 1992), 61. Aston remarks of this episode: "there is an explicit connection between the frightening aspect of Dionysos and his animal form(s)" and that "the adoption of a series of animal forms is always intended to alarm and deter" (Aston, *Mixanthrôpoi*, 128). In Nonnos's *Dionysiaka*, Dionysus is threatened by Titans (Nonn. *D.* 6.179–205) and to evade



they meet Hermes, who enables a transformation of their own: Hermes converts each of the women into birds (εἷς ὀρνίθας),<sup>68</sup> a little owl (Gr. γλαύξ, *Athene noctua*), an eagle owl/barn owl (Gr. βύξα, *Bubo bubo/Tyto alba*), and, strangely, a bat (Gr. νυκτερίς).<sup>69</sup> In his commentary of the passage, Celoria points out the evidence, offered by both poetry and the visual arts, of Dionysus's three-fold animal metamorphism. In invocations of Dionysus, the three-fold animal feature was often emphasized.<sup>70</sup> The animals may differ—a snake might take the place of a leopard or a panther—but there are always three of them.<sup>71</sup> The animals in the

them, he adopts a series of animal forms. Metamorphosis also figures in the parentage of the Orphic Dionysus (Aston, *Mixanthrōpoi*, 277).

68 If one took the view presented by Weicker (largely rejected in subsequent scholarship) that in Greek belief the souls of the dead took the form of birds, this would be a euphemistic way of saying the Minyades died. G. Weicker, *Der Seelenvogel* (Leipzig, 1902). For discussion of this specific passage in the story of Minyades, see Celoria, *Metamorphoses*, 135, note 126. For a thorough discussion of the close relation of winged creatures, especially birds, to metamorphosis and mixanthropy, see Aston, *Mixanthrōpoi*, 68, 135, 178.

69 Bats are apparently considered to be birds in many classical and Hellenistic sources. See the example of *PGM XII*, where on lines 382–83 the practitioner is instructed to “release the bird” (ἀπόλυσον τὸ ὀρνύφιν) when referring to the previously acquired bat (λαβὼν νυκτερίδα, line 376) that was used in the spell.

70 Mixanthropes are also a prominent part of Dionysus's retinue (*thiasos*), but accounts of the god's own mixanthropy are all literary and quite late, such as the Orphic Hymns to Dionysus. Aston cites one mention of a cult-receiving, mixanthropic Dionysus by Lykophron (Lyc. *Alex.* 1237), the Macedonian Dionysus Laphystios and his worshippers (Λαφυστίας κερασφόρους γυναικας). The mixanthropic elements have been part of Dionysus's persona from the early stages of his cult. The bull (bull's foot, horns, and voice) is a motif. Yet his cult images are, for the most part, fully anthropomorphic until the Hellenistic era, when mixanthropic depictions (usually with horns but otherwise still human) start to appear. The possibility that this manner of depicting Dionysus might be a completely novel innovation of the Hellenistic era must not be overlooked. The idea that mixanthropic deities represent some primitive phase of Greek religion is rejected by Aston as lacking any foundation in extant sources. See Aston, *Mixanthrōpoi*, 30–31, 127, 131, 200–201. On the Orphic Dionysus and the Orphic hymns, see W. Quandt, *Orphic Hymni* (Berlin, 1962), and G. Ricciardelli, *Inni Orfici* (Rome, 2000), which is the most recent edition. For a view on the change from theriomorphism to anthropomorphism in Greek religion, see J. R. Veenstra, “The Ever-Changing Nature of the Beast,” in *The Metamorphosis of Magic from Late Antiquity to the Early Modern Period*, ed. J. N. Bremmer and J. R. Veenstra (Leuven, 2002), 134–66, esp. 143–44.

71 Celoria, *Metamorphoses*, 135, note 124.

hystera formula closely mirror the forms Dionysus is said to assume: the bull,<sup>72</sup> the lion, and the snake.<sup>73</sup>

The same combination of animals—typically snake, bull, and lion, as well as elements, such as fire and water—appears both in the Byzantine hystera formula and in the classical literary accounts of both metamorphosis and of metamorphic or mixanthropic creatures, such as Proteus, Typhoeus, Acheloüs, and Dionysus. It is clear that there is a connection between the rapid transformation from one animal form to the next, the stable state of a truly mixanthropic being, and the animal comparison of the hystera formula.

## Conquering the Uterus

The objective of the hystera formula was to name and recognize the wild, animalistic behavior of the uterus, and then command it to calm down. This happens in a way that is strikingly similar to stories of saints fighting demons that either take the form of animals or animal hybrids.<sup>74</sup> Christopher A. Faraone has connected the Greek and Near Eastern purification rituals meant to drive out demons with the fumigations meant to return the womb in its place.<sup>75</sup> The conquering of animalistic

72 Plutarch (Plu. *Quaest. Gr.* 36) tells of a ritual of unknown date in which women of Elis ask Dionysus to come to them βοέω ποδι θύων (running with ox-feet) and call the god ἄξιε ταῦρε (worthy bull).

73 It must be noted that in the hystera formula the uterus is compared to a lion, but not to a leopard.

74 Out of the animals mentioned in the hystera formula, the ox and the lamb are traditional sacrificial animals already in the Old Testament (Deut. 14:4–16; Deut. 17:1; Deut. 18:3), while the snake and the lion are not. The ox and the lamb also occur in Christian sacrificial language. In general, animals that are depicted as demonic—never include traditionally sacrificial animals, but mainly *theria*, wild animals, such as snakes and scorpions, and of domesticated animals, dogs. Comparison with animals appears often in rhetoric. For example, Cicero and St. Jerome compare their enemies or people they saw as immodest or immoral to animals. Various peoples are compared to animals (for example, Huns to wolves), but so are the Romans (to wolves, in the speech of Mithridates as told by Pompeius Trogus). Gilhus, *Animals, Gods and Humans* (n. 16 above), 172–76, 179–80, 227–28. Byzantine attitudes toward animals are reflected in the interpretations of animal dreams in Byzantine dream books. See S. M. Oberhelman, *Dreambooks in Byzantium: Six Oneirocritica in Translation, with Commentary and Introduction* (London, 2008) for a recent edition of translations of six Byzantine dream books (Oneirocritica of Daniel, Nicephorus, Astrampsychus, Germanus, Manuel II Palaeologus, and one anonymous).

75 Faraone, “Magical and Medical Approaches” (n. 1 above), 15–16.



demons is a typical theme in the New Testament, late antique magical texts, such as *Testamentum Salomonis*,<sup>76</sup> and hagiographies.

In the *Testamentum Salomonis*, King Solomon summons and conquers one demon after another. One of the demons is Obyzouth, who appears only as a disembodied face surrounded by wild hair<sup>77</sup>—a real-life Medusa emblem.

In the Athanasius's *Life of Anthony*, the devil's capability to shape-shift is noted, and the demons Antony fights appear as various animals:

καὶ ἦν ὁ τόπος εὐθὺς πεπληρωμένος φαντασίας  
λεόντων, ἄρκτων, λεοπάρδων, ταύρων, καὶ ὄφεων,  
ἀσπίδων, καὶ σκορπίων, καὶ λύκων. Καὶ ἕκαστον  
μὲν τούτων ἐκίνει κατὰ τὸ ἴδιον σχῆμα.

All at once the place was filled with the phantoms of lions, bears, leopards, bulls, and of serpents, asps, and scorpions, and of wolves; and each moved according to the shape it had assumed.<sup>78</sup>

At the center of this depiction of the fight between Antony and the demons is the idea of the need to conquer and destroy animals.<sup>79</sup> This view, that the fate of adversaries of Christ is to be crushed, is stressed later on in the *Life of Anthony*: “And with him [the Devil] are placed the demons his fellows, like serpents and scorpions to be trodden underfoot by us Christians.”<sup>80</sup> The same notion is echoed in Psalm 90 (91), which was frequently reproduced in full or in part on the Syro-Palestinian amulets as well as the Byzantine hystera amulets:<sup>81</sup> “Thou shalt tread upon the lion and adder:

the young lion and the dragon shalt thou trample under feet.”<sup>82</sup>

The connection is clear between the wild animals that the uterus is compared to in the hystera formula and the demons in the form of wild animals that the saints battle. The message is that the amulet will conquer the misbehaving uterus and vanquish child-killing demons, just as the demons are conquered by the saints and Christ.<sup>83</sup> The result is the returning of the uterus into a tame and fertile state. This is reinforced by the combination of the rider saint motif with the hystera motif and the hystera formula. The motif of the rider saint subjugating or killing a demon appears on the same amulet as the hystera motif in fourteen amulets.<sup>84</sup>

The animals mentioned in the hystera formula not only refer to the wild behavior of the uterus but are also a reference to the existing tradition of how metamorphosis was perceived.<sup>85</sup> Aston has shown convincingly that in literary accounts of metamorphosis, the emphasis is on the act of metamorphosis and the fluid transformation from one form to the next through intermediary steps or forms, whereas in pictorial accounts (most often vase paintings) the visual combination of animal parts, and the half-human, half-animal state of the subject in the middle of metamorphosing is underlined.<sup>86</sup> The transformation from one

76 A work from fourth century CE at the latest, combining folklore, astrological, demonological and magical traditions into a biography of Solomon. C. C. McCown, ed., *Διαθήκη Σολομώντος. The Testament of Solomon* (Leipzig, 1922), 42–43.

77 *Diath. Sol.* 5: σκότος τὸ σῶμα αὐτῆς ὑπῆρχε καὶ αἱ τρίχες αὐτῆς ἡγριωμένα.

78 Greek text from PG 26:857. Translation by R. T. Meyer, *The Life of St. Anthony* (New York, 1950).

79 Gilhus, *Animals, Gods and Humans*, 221.

80 Translation from A. Robertson in P. Schaff and H. Wace, eds., *Athanasius, Select Works and Letters* (Grand Rapids, 1987), 202, ch. 24.

81 Spier, “Medieval Byzantine Magical Amulets,” 60, amulet nos. 21 (pl. 2b), 22, 47 (pl. 4a).

82 Ps. 91:13, King James Version. The lion appears, subdued, under the rider saint in some Early Byzantine Christian medical amulets. See B. Pitarakis, “Magie, santé, piété privée: Les vertus du motif du lion sur les amulettes paléobyzantines,” in Dasen and Spieser, *Les savoirs magiques* (n. 5 above), 371–96, especially figs. 4, 5, 7.

83 Barb, “Diva Matrix” (n. 21 above), 211, 214, n. 23.

84 Spier, “Medieval Byzantine Magical Amulets,” amulet nos. 15–24, 33, the addendum on page 62; Kiziltan and Baran Çelik, *Stories from the Hidden Harbor* (n. 11 above), nos. 80 and 81. Six of the amulets in Spier also feature the hystera formula (amulet nos. 15–18, 33, the addendum on page 62).

85 On the general symbolism and interpretation of metamorphosis in Greek myths, see Gilhus, *Animals, Gods and Humans*, 78–92.

86 A subtle difference between modes of art can also be discerned. In literature, a wholly human form is favored, whereas vase paintings more commonly show a mixanthropic form. See Aston, *Mixanthrôpoi*, 126. However, here we encounter the problem of applying a theory that seeks to explain certain features in a specific period in history—Aston’s theory on metamorphosis deals with the associations, myth forms, and thought patterns of classical antiquity—to a completely different time period. To what extent can her findings be applied to explain and understand the mindset of people from the sixth–seventh and tenth–twelfth centuries and therefore the use of mixanthropic and metamorphic elements in the

animal form to another, and the specific animal forms assumed in the course of the transformation—lion, snake, bull—in classical literary accounts of metamorphosis foreshadow the animal forms that the uterus is compared to in the Byzantine hystera formula.<sup>87</sup>

The two gemstone amulets that substitute the sea for the lamb or “tame creature” refer to the sea as calm, and ask that the uterus be calm as well.<sup>88</sup> This differs from the usual connection often drawn in scholarship between the sea and metamorphosis, where the fluidity of the transformation of the shape-shifters is the opposite of calm: unstable and unpredictable, much like the sea, in “perpetual movement, taking no fixed form.”<sup>89</sup> Paul Forbes Irving does not see the sea as the primary link to the metamorphosis itself; rather, he believes that the connection to the sea distinguishes and marks the subject undergoing metamorphosis as an outsider to the everyday terrestrial world, just as shape-shifting

hystera amulets, even though the classical texts were known in the Byzantine empire?

87 One example among many in Ovid (*Ov. Am.* 3.12.21–23) is his description of Scylla, where the poet tells us how she takes the forms of a wolf, a dog, and a snake: *Per nos Scylla patri caros furata capillo. Pube premit rabidos inguinibusque canes; Nos pedibus pinnas dedimus, nos crinibus angues.* “‘Twas we poets made Scylla steal from her sire his treasured locks, and hide in her groin the savage dogs; ‘tis we who have placed wings on feet, and mingled snakes with hair.” Translation by J. H. Mozley, ed. and trans., *Ovid*, vol. 2, *Art of Love; Cosmetics; Remedies for Love; Ibis; Walnut-tree; Sea Fishing; Consolation*, Loeb (Cambridge, MA, 1929). In a similar passage (*Ov. Met.* 1.504–6), Apollo chases Daphne and calls to her: “O nymph, O Peneus’ daughter, stay! I who pursue thee am no enemy. Oh stay! So does the lamb flee from the wolf; the deer from the lion; so do doves on fluttering wing flee from the eagle; so every creature flees its foes.” Translation by Miller, *Ovid* (n. 64 above). Here the animals invoked are wolf, lion, and eagle. These animals do not denote the forms that are metamorphosed into, but the threefold structure in a passage dealing with metamorphosis is, I think, significant. Obviously not all depictions of metamorphosis feature these three animals (e.g., the case of Lykaon).

88 Spier, “Medieval Byzantine Magical Amulets” (n. 3 above), amulet nos. 56 and 57.

89 Aston, *Mixanthrōpoi*, 160. Forbes Irving talks about how the roots of the connection have been seen lying in natural symbolism: the sea creatures’ connection to the fluidity of water is translated to the fluidity of shape and movement in myth. He then highlights that this is not in fact the view taken in ancient sources, where the attributes of the sea primarily concern its shapelessness and infinite vastness and depth (such as ἀπείριστος, ἀτείρων, ἀθέσφατος, πολυβενθής). The gift of shape-shifting is instead attributed to the clouds (as in *Ar. Nub.* 349–50). P. M. C. Forbes Irving, *Metamorphosis in Greek Myths* (New York, 1990), 173–74 with nn. 8 and 10.

does.<sup>90</sup> In this regard the shape-shifting accomplishes the same goal as the characteristic of having snake hair does: marking the subject as “other” and outside the bounds of normal life.

The idea of the uterus as an octopus may help to clarify this connection to the sea. The octopus is a marine creature that needs wetness and humidity in order to survive. Ancient medical writers considered women to be naturally wet and spongy.<sup>91</sup> Keeping with the idea of health as balance, as promoted by the Hippocratic writers,<sup>92</sup> the uterus was thought to be the most content and fertile when it was closest to its natural wet and heavy state. If the uterus got too dry, it would move around the body in search of humidity<sup>93</sup>

90 Gods are seldom depicted as true shape-shifters. The gods take on a disguise; they do not *become* the disguise. Only in the case of true shape-shifters do the sources use the verb “becoming” (γίγνομαι). Metamorphosis into multiple shapes in quick succession is usually attributed to demons, sorcerers, spirits of the dead, or those under a spell. See Forbes Irving, *Metamorphosis*, 171, 179, 191, 194. An example of the latter is the metamorphosis of Empusa in *Ar. Ra.* 288 (παντοδαπὸν γούν γίγνεται) where Empusa changes into a cow (τοτὲ μὲν γε βοῦς), a mule (νυνὶ δ’ ὄρεῦς), a beautiful woman (τοτὲ δ’ αὖ γυνὴ ὠραιότατή τις), and a dog (ἄλλ’ ἤδη κύων).

91 Hippoc. *Mul.* 1.1: “. . . For very white women are moister and more subject to fluxes, and dark women are drier and more constricted, whereas wine-colored women have something of both. . . . young women are generally moister and richer in blood, while old women are drier and have less blood: those between the two have something of both. . . . I shall begin my lesson with what is by nature moist.” (αἱ μὲν γὰρ ὑπὲρλευκοὶ ὑγρότεραί τε καὶ βρωδέστεραι, αἱ δὲ μέλαιναί τε ξηρότεραί τε καὶ στριφνότεραι, αἱ δὲ οἶνωπαὶ μέσον τι ἀμφοτέρων ἔχουσιν. . . . αἱ μὲν νέαι ὑγρότεραι καὶ πολυαίμοι ὥς ἐπὶ τὸ πολὺ, αἱ δὲ πρεσβύτεραι ξηρότεραι καὶ ὀλίγαίμοι, αἱ δὲ μέσαι μέσον τι ἀμφοτέρων ἔχουσι. . . . ἄρξομαι δὲ διδάσκων ἀπὸ τοῦ ὑγροῦ κατὰ φύσιν.) Translation by P. Potter, ed. and trans., *Hippocrates*, vol 10, *Generation; Nature of the Child; Diseases 4; Nature of Women and Barrenness*, Loeb (Cambridge, MA, 2012).

92 H. King, “Women’s Health and Recovery in the Hippocratic Corpus,” in *Health in Antiquity*, ed. H. King (London and New York, 2005), 150–61, esp. 151, 156.

93 Hippoc. *Mul.* 1.30: “If the uterus comes to occupy a loin or flank, and you wish to make it move, grind sulfur and asphalt, add boiled honey, form this into a thick pessary, and insert it into the patient’s seat. Also, if women become dry on account of their uterus, apply the same things at once.” (Ὦν ἐν τῇ ὀσφύϊ αἱ ὑστέραι ἔωσιν ἢ ἐν τῷ κενεῶνι, ἣν θέλῃς μετακινήσαι, τρίψας θείον καὶ ἄσφαλτον, μέλι ἐφθὸν περιχέας, καὶ ποιήσας βάλανον παχείην ἐς τὴν ἔδρην ἐνθεῖς κὴν ἐκ τῶν ὑστερέων ξηραὶ γένωνται, τὰ αὐτὰ προσθεῖναι ὥς τάχιστα.) Translation by Potter, *Hippocrates*.

and mechanically up and down within the body through a tube (the vagina).<sup>94</sup>

In addition, the hystera/Chnoubis variant resembles a human-animal metamorphosis *in fieri*—the face is still human, but the hair (and sometimes the body) is that of a snake. The belief, stemming from antiquity, that the uterus was an animal within an animal is reflected in the zoomorphism of the hystera formula. Anna Bonnell-Freidlin, in her case study of two third-century uterine amulets, concludes that the amulets “blur the boundary between the human and non-human.”<sup>95</sup>

The theme of metamorphosis is also deeply connected to a belief in child-killing demons that seek to harm the uterus and children, to the extent that the child-killing demons were conflated with the monstrosity of the misbehaving, unfertile uterus. This is evident in the fact that the attribute “black, blackening” is used to refer both to the uterus (as seen in the hystera formula) and to the child-killing demon. In a narrative charm preserved in a manuscript from 1153 CE, archangel Michael meets the demon Abra (Ἀβρα) and addresses her as ἄβρα μελάνη μεμελανωμένη.<sup>96</sup> In his seventeenth-century *De quorundam Graecorum opinionibus*, Leo Allatius tells of a remedy against the

child-killing demon Gello in the form of a narrative spell. In the tale two brothers, Saints Sisinnios<sup>97</sup> and Sisynodoros, chase Gello, who has killed their sister (or in other accounts, mother) Melitene. On their way they ask help from a willow, thorn bush, and blackberry, but no one is willing to help them. Finally an olive tree helps the saints and warns them that Gello must be caught as soon as possible, as she is nearing the seashore. The brothers catch Gello on the seashore, where she goes through a series of transformations—in one account, into a fish,<sup>98</sup> in another, into a swallow, a fish, and a goat.<sup>99</sup> In the eleventh century, belief in the shape-shifting capabilities of Gello was apparently widespread enough that Michael Psellus felt the need to denounce belief in the demon as a frivolous superstition, emphasizing that Gello does not “change her shape from a wild beast into a human, nor from a human into a wild beast” (οὐτὲ θηρίον ποτ’ ἂν ἐξανθρωπισθείη οὐτε μὴν ἄνθρωπος εἰς θῆρα μετενεχθείη).<sup>100</sup>

The hystera formula recognizes and names the animalistic behavior of the uterus, commanding it to calm down and become a tame creature. This echoes the structure of stories of Christian saints defeating demons that are compared to animals (and also take the actual form of animals) by knowing their secret names. The saints are able to defeat the demons by recognizing their fundamental nature, and by using that knowledge against them. The hystera formula is fashioned to subdue the uterus by recognizing its metamorphic qualities, reflected in the comparison of the organ to a series of animals. Furthermore, the misbehaving uterus is conflated with the child-killing demons, also capable of metamorphosis, which are conquered by saints like Sisinnios and Sisynodoros. In effect, the misbehaving uterus is exorcised as if it were a demon.

94 See note 7 above; Dasen, “Métamorphoses de l’utérus” (n. 23 above), 9. In antiquity, it was also commonly believed that the uterus could be attracted by pleasant smells and repulsed by unpleasant ones. In practice this meant that had the uterus been displaced, it could be cajoled back to its proper location by placing fragrant balms or ointments near the vagina. See Hippoc. *Mul.* 1.26: “When the uterus causes suffocation, hold all sorts of evil-smelling fumigations under the patient’s nostrils: pitch, sulfur, horn, lamp wick, seal oil, castoreum; below her genitalia [sc. fumigate with] fragrant ones.” (Ὅκοταν πνίγωσιν αἱ ὑστέραι, ὑποθυμῖν χρὴ τὰ κακῶδεα πάντα ὑπὸ τὰς ῥίνας, ἄσφαλτον, θεῖον, κέρας, ἐλλύχνιον, φώκης ἔλαιον, καστόριον· ὑπὸ δὲ τὰ αἰδοῖα τὰ εὐώδεα.) Translation by Potter, *Hippocrates*. See also, e.g., Adair, “Plato’s View” and Faraone, “New Light” (both n. 20 above).

95 Bonnell-Freidlin, “Birth and the Many-Legged Womb” (n. 26 above). The discussion on boundaries of the body and contrast of the unseen inside with the visible outside ties in with Aston’s argument on the mixanthropic nature of Pandora (see Aston, *Mixanthropoi* [n. 4 above], 328–43).

96 MS no. 973 (*Euchologion* of the monastery of Mt. Sinai) in A. Dmitrievskij, *Opisanie liturgitseskich rukopisej*, vol. 2, *Ευχολόγια* (1901; repr. Kiev and Hildesheim, 1965), 118. Barb has also noted this connection of the female archdemon being addressed with the same words that the uterus is addressed with, μελαίνη μελανομένη (Barb, “Diva Matrix” [n. 21 above], 237, note 301).

97 Sisinnios is named pursuing the demon “Abizou Anabardalea” in the inscription of a silver pendant (Spier, “Medieval Byzantine Magical Amulets,” amulet no. 33). “Abizou” has been identified as Obyzouth, the demon conquered by King Solomon (*Diath. Sol.* 5) (Barb, “Antaura,” 5, 9, note 44; idem, “Diva Matrix,” note 85).

98 Argenti and Rose, *Folk-lore of Chios* (n. 27 above), 42–45.

99 J. C. Lawson, *Modern Greek Folklore and Ancient Greek Religion* (Cambridge, 1964), 178. For Gello’s role in Graeco-Roman folklore, see D. B. Oikonomides, “Ἡ Γελλῶ εἰς τὴν Ἑλληνικὴν καὶ Ῥωμαϊκὴν λαογραφίαν,” *Λαογραφία* 30 (1975–76): 246–78.

100 My translation; Michael Psellus, *Philosophica minora*, 2:49.1–28, ed. D. J. O’Meara (Leipzig, 1989).

## Conclusion

Classical epics and plays that were known in the Byzantine Empire are the sources from which the mix-anthropomorphic and metamorphic elements of the hystera formula were derived. By late antiquity the formulaic structure of metamorphic animal comparison could have become a living fossil that could be easily lifted and fitted elsewhere. To this was added the idea of a “black” and “blackening” uterus. Pointing to the route of direct borrowing is the fact that the hystera formula emulates in concept and diction the typical depiction of metamorphosis in the Greek and Latin corpus.

The “tame creature” from the formula of the Syro-Palestinian bronze amulets is a lamb or a sheep<sup>101</sup> (or the sea) in the Byzantine hystera formula. Just as biblical saints defeated demons disguised as animals, the purpose of the amulets was to defeat the child-killing demons and the misbehaving uterus, making it compliant, “like a tame creature,” and giving its wearer the assurance of an easy and safe pregnancy and childbirth. In the magical tradition that the hystera for-

mula belongs to, not only do the demons themselves emanate animal voices, but they cause their victims to sound and act like animals as well. The hystera formula addresses the hystera as if it were a demon, and the misbehaving, unfertile uterus is conflated with child-killing demons that are also capable of metamorphosis.

The hystera motif combines, in visual form, the belief in the uterus as an animal with a will of its own, aspects of metamorphosis, and apotropaic qualities of the *gorgoneion*. The development of the formula and the motif was likely a case of, to borrow a term from the biological sciences, “parallel evolution” (the independent development of a similar trait in different species). In practice it must not have mattered that much to the amulet makers and wearers which image was used—a cupping vessel, a Chnoubis, an octopus—for all could be used and conflated in magical practice with the attitude of “whatever works.” Integral to all were the metamorphic qualities ascribed to the uterus, reflected in the hystera formula.

University of Helsinki  
Unioninkatu 40,  
P.O. Box 24, 00014  
University of Helsinki, Finland  
heta.bjorklund@helsinki.fi

101 The lamb could be construed as a reference to Christ as the Lamb of God. More on the specific symbolism of the lamb, see Gilhus, *Animals, Gods and Humans* (n. 16 above), 173–75.